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The Importance Given to Personal Values Depends on Whether you Focus on Social Desirability or Utility

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Supplementary Materials: Data, Preregistration [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

The goal of this paper is to answer the following question: What personal values are most important to people? Building on Dubois and Beauvois' model of social value, I try to show that the prioritization of personal values depends on the evaluative focus (social desirability versus social utility) one adopts. In two studies ($N_{total} = 2019$) asking participants to judge Schwartz's personal values when adopting the two different evaluative foci, the results showed that self-transcendence (self-enhancement) values were systematically judged as more socially desirable (socially useful) than self-enhancement (self-transcendence) ones, with openness-to-change and conservation falling in between. These results may help resolve inconsistencies observed in the literature between works showing a general preference for self-transcendence values and others pointing to the centrality of self-enhancement values in the functioning of capitalist societies.

Keywords

personal values, social desirability, social utility, social value



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Highlights

- Inconsistencies have been observed in literature on personal values, with some works showing a general preference for self-transcendence values, while others point to the centrality of self-enhancement values in capitalist societies.
- These studies help to resolve inconsistencies by showing that personal value priorities depend on the evaluative focus adopted: social desirability (e.g., its reputational likeability) versus social utility (e.g., its reputational bankability).
- Two studies using different samples ($N = 2,019$) revealed that people prioritize self-transcendence values when evaluating the social desirability of personal values, and self-enhancement values when evaluating their social utility.

What are the personal values that matter most to people? This question is of significance as values can be important determinants of behaviors (Roccas & Sagiv, 2017). Therefore, knowing which values people prioritize can help answer important questions about people's ongoing behavior. According to Schwartz's theory (1992), there is a consensus on the priority of self-transcendence values and the rejection of self-enhancement values, especially their power component (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). However, this conclusion seemed to be contradicted by another body of research showing that capitalist societies foster and encourage the adherence to self-enhancement values at the expense of self-transcendence values (Kasser et al., 2007). Drawing on the social evaluative model of Dubois and Beauvois (2011), I suggest that this apparent contradiction may be mitigated by considering the type of evaluative perspective people take when judging the importance of values.

Priorities in Personal Values

Values refer to objectives that are desirable, transcendent, and establish the principles guiding the life of a person. Schwartz's (1992) theory presents a set of 10 values defining a system in which the relationships between them form a circular structure that represents their conflicts and congruences¹. This structure can be summarized in two basic conflicts, one opposing openness-to-change (self-direction, hedonism, and stimulation values) with conservation of the status quo (tradition, conformity and security values). The other contrasts self-enhancement (power and achievement values) with self-transcendence (benevolence and universalism values). Schwartz's model has been tested and validated in more than 75 countries (Schwartz, 1992, 2008). This model can be

1) The 10-value model was recently expanded to a 19-value model (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022). Importantly, the new model still comprises the initial ten values with some of them being further partitioned. Since the present studies are the first steps in a research program, I decided not to incorporate the complexity of the 19-value model from the outset.

conceived as a reference point because of its high contemporary influence and because it is probably the most comprehensive model (Hanel et al., 2018).

One important point for our purpose concerns the priorities that people attribute to these values. They have been mainly measured through the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS) with questions asking participants to rate the importance of each value item as a guiding principle in their life. Notwithstanding slight departures (Witte et al., 2020), a striking finding regarding the hierarchy of values is the apparent cross-national consensus on the priority of self-transcendence values and the rejection of self-enhancement values, especially power (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). Indeed, when averaging the ratings at a national level, benevolence values are consistently among the most important followed by universalism, self-direction, security, conformity, hedonism, achievement, tradition, stimulation, and power. This hierarchy stands for both the national level and the individual level. In fact, while there are significant differences in value priorities from one individual to another, depending on gender, and occupation, among others, these differences are relative rather than absolute. For example, business students favor self-enhancement more than psychology students, however, both placed more importance to self-transcendence than self-enhancement (see Arieli et al., 2020 for a review).

However, there are some exceptions to this consensual pattern. Kasser et al. (2007) presented a large body of evidence suggesting how the institutions and ideologies of corporate capitalism foster a set of values related to self-enhancement (i.e., self-interest, desire for financial success, and competition) while at the same time undermine concern for self-transcendence values (i.e., the welfare of others, and developing and maintaining close relations with family and friends). Following this interpretation, Schwartz (2007) showed that the more competitive and market-driven societies are, the more individuals attach importance to achievement, and power values and less to universalism values.

So, ultimately, we are left with two opposing sets of findings. On the one hand, research showing that people generally place more value on self-transcendence values than on self-enhancement values, and on the other hand, studies showing that capitalist societies encourage and foster self-enhancement values and de-emphasize self-transcendence values. How is it possible to reconcile these two divergent streams of research? I will argue that the type of evaluative focus people can adopt possibly explains these differences.

Two Dimensions of Value

In social psychology, evaluation and value are often thought of as the act of placing a stimulus on a single affective dimension. For example, Tesser and Martin (1996) wrote: "Evaluation refers to what is captured by people's responses on dimensions such as good-bad, like-dislike, feel good about-feel bad about, approve-disapprove" (p. 400). However, this one-dimensionality has been challenged by works coming from people's perception literature. According to Dubois and Beauvois (2011), in their daily life, people

develop a knowledge of the social value of objects, events, themselves and other people. This knowledge is not descriptive, that is, it is not an attempt to depict an object from its characteristics. Rather, it is an *evaluative* knowledge proceeding from people's attempts to make sense of the function that objects have within a certain social system. This evaluative knowledge allows people to attribute value to social objects, and this value, in this theoretical framework, can take on two forms, social desirability and social utility. Social desirability reflects the knowledge people have of affects that a social object can elicit, or ways in which that object can satisfy the principal motivation of people. In other words, the social desirability of an object refers to its reputational likeability. The second dimension relates more to the positioning of the social object in the social status hierarchy and refers to whether it meets the requirements of the functioning of society (Cambon, 2022; see also Butera et al., 2024). This form of value is potentially independent of people's preferences, and it should be understood in the quasi-economic sense of market value. In other words, this form of worth results from the knowledge of the value that society assigns to the object (i.e., its reputational "bankability").

Although the distinction between social desirability and social utility is akin to the distinction between the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of the Big Two recently put forth by an adversarial collaboration between the authors of the five main models of social judgment (Abele et al., 2021), it differs on one crucial point: the epistemic status of the perceiver. In the collaborative framework, the perceiver is conceived of as an isolated individual *inferring* the value that objects can have from her personal point of view. In the evaluative knowledge framework, the perceiver is conceived of as a social agent *knowing* the value that objects have in society, from the social desirability and social utility standpoint. Thus, this distinction is particularly relevant for answering the question of personal value priority. Indeed, value priorities are highly disputed between social groups, it is likely that when judging the importance of values people not only act as individuals but also as social agents positioning themselves in relation to other groups in society and keeping in mind the social desirability and utility of each value.

The Social Desirability and Social Utility of Personal Values

Given the definition of social desirability, socially desirable personal values are values that, when expressed by people, are perceived by others as consistent with a human's main motivations and affects, and tend to elicit positive rather than negative affect in social interactions. In this sense, self-transcendence values should be considered the most desirable values. Indeed, benevolence and universalism generally support behaviors that favor egalitarian, honest, harmonious relations between people (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022). And these relations have obvious implication for the welfare of people and are usually considered unconditionally positive (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). On the contrary, self-enhancement values could be considered as having implications opposed to the welfare of people as the excessive pursuit of self-interest and materialism is likely to harm

others. For example, [Kasser et al. \(2007\)](#) reviewed literature showing how self-enhancement values conflict with socially desirable features, such as caring about the broader world, and having close relationships with others. Finally, although not as central to the perception of social desirability as characteristics conveyed by self-transcendence, openness to change and conservation values contain features that present a certain level of social desirability (i.e., the search for independence, excitement, pleasure, for openness-to-change; an emphasis on harmony, restraint of actions likely to harm others, for conservation). Thus, I expect self-transcendence to be considered the most socially desirable personal value, self-enhancement the least desirable, and openness-to-change and conservation to lie in the middle.

According to [Dubois and Beauvois \(2011\)](#), it is important to note that social utility should not be equated with its functional meaning ("the state of being useful"), but rather refers to the knowledge people have of an object's "market value" in society. In this sense, socially useful personal values are values that, when expressed by people, are perceived by others as consistent with the main requirements of society, and as endorsed by people having the most highly ranked positions in society². So, what are the main requirements of contemporary societies? As shown by several scholars ([Bettache, 2024](#); [Kasser et al., 2007](#)), capitalist societies are mainly characterized by the valorization of economic profit and economic growth. This primacy led to the cultural dominance of values consistent with these principles, while marginalizing alternative and incompatible values ([Bourdieu, 1977](#)). In this paper, I argue that self-enhancement values with their focus on the attainment of success, prestige and wealth, as well as on mastering and controlling people and resources, are the values that best align with these principles. On the contrary, values of self-transcendence, which emphasize the preservation of nature and the welfare of others, as well as the pursuit of justice and equality, are probably the most incompatible with them. As a consequence, people should perceive self-enhancement values as the most socially useful and self-transcendence as the least useful. This theoretical analysis is supported by data showing that capitalism generally fosters self-enhancement values but inhibits self-transcendence values ([Bettache, 2024](#); [Kasser et al., 2007](#); [Schwartz, 2007](#)). Openness-to-change clearly contains features valorized in contemporary capitalist societies, and that may influence judgments of social utility (i.e., the promotion of self, of independence, and challenge in life). However, I would argue that these features are less central to the pursuit of economic growth than achievement and power values are (for a similar argument see [Katz & Hass, 1988](#); [Van Berkel et al., 2015](#)). Finally,

2) Therefore, claiming that self-enhancement values have social utility does not imply that they promote the efficient functioning of society. In fact, self-enhancement values, such as greed and self-interest, often hinder the smooth operation of social systems. Rather, it suggests that these values hold a privileged position in society (a high "market value"), even if it is functionally maladaptive.

conservation contains some features valorized in capitalist societies (the necessity to live in accordance with the rules of society) but also features less valorized, such as tradition.

To summarize, I expect that self-enhancement values will be considered the most socially useful and least socially desirable personal values whereas self-transcendence will be considered the most socially desirable and least socially useful personal values, with openness-to change and conservation lying in the middle. These hypotheses are consistent with works from [Trapnell and Paulhus \(2012\)](#) showing that self-transcendence (self-enhancement) was highly positively (negatively) correlated with communion (a meta-concept related to the maintenance of positive relationships) whereas openness-to-change and conservation showed only modest positive correlations with this meta-concept. On the contrary, self-enhancement (self-transcendence) was highly positively (negatively) correlated with agency (a meta-concept related to self-advancement in the social hierarchies) whereas openness-to-change and conservation, again, showed only modest positive correlations with this concept.

Overview of the Studies

I conducted two studies to investigate the evaluative basis of judgments about personal values. Study 1 asked participants to judge the 10 personal values of Schwarz's model using instructions focused on the social desirability and the social utility of personal values, but also using the standard instruction used in most studies on values. Study 2 was a conceptual replication testing the same hypotheses with less oriented instructions and using a more diverse sample to investigate potential differences in value priorities. I expected that a social desirability focus should lead participants to evaluate self-transcendence values more positively than self-enhancement ones, whereas a social utility focus should lead them to evaluate self-enhancement values more positively than self-transcendence ones. For each focus, I expected openness-to-change and conservation values to fall in between these two extremes. For exploratory purposes, I tested whether the standard instruction used in values studies was closer to a social desirability or a social utility focus. I suspected that the standard instruction would be closer to a social desirability focus than to a social utility focus. Indeed, [Dentale et al. \(2018, Study 2\)](#) showed that scores obtained on a values questionnaire with the special instruction to "appear as good as possible with other people" correlated ($r = .49$) with responses given under the standard instruction. For the sake of brevity, these last analyses are reported in the exploratory analyses section of Study 1 in the supplementary materials.

All material and data set can be found (see [Cambon, 2025](#)).

Study 1

Method

This study was pre-registered (see [Cambon, 2024a](#)). I report all manipulations, measures and exclusions.

Participants

I computed sample size for the two-way interaction using a 10 (type of values) X 3 (instructions) repeated measures ANOVA. Without any prior estimation of the effect size, I decided to use a medium Cohen's d of .40. To detect the two-way interaction, the Pangea Webapp (<https://jakewestfall.shinyapps.io/pangea/>) suggests that a total of 110 participants would be needed to achieve 90% power³. To avoid overestimation of effect size and potential data loss, I secured the recruitment of 150 participants. Eight participants showed an invariant response style and four spent much more or less time (+/- 3SD) than the average time; their responses were thus deleted. A total of 138 students from various majors at a large French university participated ($M_{age} = 20.56$, $SD_{age} = 1.77$, 54% women).

Procedure and Design

An internet link to the study was sent by e-mail to the students of various majors asking them to participate in an on-line study presented as dealing with social projection. Participants received no compensation. After agreeing to participate, participants were asked to judge personal values from three different standpoints: a) their importance to them (standard instruction), b) their social desirability, c) their social utility. The presentation order of instructions was randomized, as was the value presentation order. After each instruction participants filled in a manipulation check. They ended by responding to demographic questions. The study lasted about 10 minutes.

The study adopted a 10 (personal values: power vs. achievement vs. hedonism vs. stimulation vs. self direction vs. universalism vs. benevolence vs. tradition vs. conformity vs. security) X 3 (instructions: standard vs. social desirability vs. social utility) design; all variables were measured within participants.

Materials

Instructions — The instruction used in research on personal values constituted the standard instruction, it asked to “judge each value according to the importance they have for you”. The social desirability instruction was “imagine your responses will be

3) The power calculation in the preregistrations of studies 1 and 2 is slightly different from those presented in this paper due to miscalculation.

read by someone you really like. You want her/him to get the most desirable picture of you. Rate each value, not by giving your most sincere response, but by giving the answer that allows you to give the most desirable image of yourself". The social utility instruction asked: "Imagine your response will be read by someone having a very important position. You want her/him to see you as someone who has a high value in today's society. Rate each value, not by giving your most sincere response, but by giving the answer that allows you to give the image of someone who has value in today's society". These last two instructions were directly inspired from research using the self-presentation paradigm and generally used in the literature distinguishing social desirability from social utility (Butera et al., 2024; Gilibert & Cambon, 2003). The different foci are operationalized by: (a) referring to a person who is typical of the focus (i.e., someone who is liked versus someone who has high status); and (b) setting a goal that is compatible with the focus (i.e., presenting the most desirable image versus presenting the image of someone who has high social value). These operationalizations thus align with the definitions of social desirability and social utility as reputational likeability and reputational 'bankability', respectively.

Personal Values — I used the Short Schwartz Value Survey (Lindeman & Verkasalo, 2005). The SSVS included 10 items, each of which indicated one original value and the related original value items as descriptors (e.g., POWER, that is social power, authority, wealth). The items were rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important for me*) to 6 (*of absolute importance for me*)⁴.

Manipulation Check — In order to test whether participants understood each instruction correctly, they were asked to specify what type of judgment they made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*I totally judged the values according to their likeability*) to 5 (*I totally judged the values according to their societal values*), with the middle of the scale corresponding to 3 (*I don't know exactly what standard of judgment I used*).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The effectiveness of the manipulation was tested by submitting answers to the manipulation check question to a repeated measure ANOVA with instructions as variable. The manipulation was effective, $F(2, 274) = 500.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .78$. Post-hoc Tukey tests showed that all differences were significant at $p < .001$ and as expected ($M_{\text{social desirability}} = 1.73$, $SD = .86$; $M_{\text{social utility}} = 4.44$, $SD = .67$; $M_{\text{standard}} = 2.75$, $SD = .62$).

4) The SSVS used a 9-point scale ranging from 0 (opposed to my principles) to 8 (of supreme importance). I opted for a 6-point scale to reduce participants' cognitive load, in line with research suggesting that a scale with five to seven response options is most effective (Betz, 1996).

Main Analyses

To better capture each participant's prioritization of values, I mean-centered their response to each item⁵. I analyzed the results on the ten personal values (analyses on the aggregation of these values into self-enhancement, openness-to-change, self-transcendence, and conservation, are presented in the supplementary materials, see Table S1) to examine whether the ratings of these values differed as a function of the evaluative focus. This test is concerned only with the comparison between social desirability and social utility foci. A second set of analyses, presented in the supplementary material (Table S2), examined whether the standard instruction was closer to the social desirability focus or to the social utility focus.

I conducted a 10 (values) X 2 (instructions) ANOVA for repeated measures. The main effect of values was significant, $F(9, 1233) = 64.52, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .32$, and the main effect of instruction was not. However, the interaction between the two variables was significant, $F(9, 1233) = 110.6, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .44$. For the sake of brevity, I will only present this interaction. As can be seen from Table 1, value priorities differed significantly as a function of the evaluative focus. In particular, while benevolence and universalism were rated as the most socially desirable, they were rated as among the least socially useful. In contrast, power and, to a lesser extent, achievement were among the least desirable values, whereas they were the most socially useful. Moreover, only achievement, power, stimulation, benevolence, and universalism had different scores for social desirability and utility. With the exception of stimulation, all the values with different scores of social desirability and social utility were values belonging to the self-transcendence and self-enhancement dimensions.

Table 1
Means (Standard Deviation) for Each Personal Value as a Function of Instructions

	Social desirability	Social utility	Standard
Achievement	-0.11 c (1.07)	1.59 f (.90)	0.03 (1.07)
Power	-1.48 a (1.11)	1.06 e (1.16)	-1.48 (.92)
Stimulation	0.14 cd (.87)	1.19 ef (.85)	0.10 (1.25)
Hedonism	-0.14 c (.97)	-0.21 c (1.17)	0.29 (1.04)
Self-direction	0.40 d (.78)	0.49 d (1.07)	0.71 (.87)
Conformity	-0.04 cd (1.31)	-0.41 c (.92)	-0.37 (1.21)
Tradition	-0.77 b (1.29)	-1.06 a (1.04)	-1.11 (1.16)
Benevolence	1.09 e (.68)	-0.98 ab (1.29)	1.13 (.76)

5) Research on values often use mean-centering to eliminate differences in how individuals use the response scales. This method converts absolute rating obtained with rating scales into relative importance scores. (see Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022).

	Social desirability	Social utility	Standard
Universalism	1.06 e (.69)	<i>-1.04 ab (1.29)</i>	0.80 (1.14)
Security	-0.18 c (1.27)	-0.62 bc (1.02)	-0.14 (1.20)

Note. For each column, means with different subscript are significantly different at $p < .01$ after applying Tukey corrections. For each row, means with different font (bold vs. italic) differ significantly at $p < .01$. The final column is provided for comparison purposes only.

Discussion

Overall, the results showed that participants changed their personal value priorities as a function of the evaluative focus adopted. Specifically, when asked to focus on the social desirability of personal values, participants placed self-transcendence values at the top of their priorities, whereas they placed very little value on self-enhancement values. Openness-to-change and conservation value judgments fell in the middle. The pattern reversed dramatically when participants were asked to judge their personal values according to their social utility. With this evaluative criterion in mind, participants put self-enhancement values in the first place and relegated self-transcendence in the last position. Again, judgments on openness-to-change and conservation values were in the middle. To summarize, people judge self-transcendence values as socially desirable and self-enhancement ones as socially undesirable, although they recognize that the latter are more socially useful than the former. However, the sample was very modest and one might wonder whether such results could be reproduced with a more diverse sample. Additionally, the manipulation of the evaluative focus relied on a projective technique; participants were asked to imagine their response. Therefore, participants' answers in this context may differ from their answers in a direct assessment of their values, which could limit the generalizability of the results. These issues will be addressed in Study 2.

Study 2

The main goal of this study was to increase the external validity of our results. It differed from Study 1 in several ways. First, rather than using a projective technique, more direct instructions for social desirability and utility were used. So, for social desirability, participants were simply asked to indicate the importance they attached to the different values. This new instruction⁶ allows for the conceptual replication of social desirability, while providing a basis for comparison between the current results and those obtained in the literature on personal values. The correlations between the values under

6) The equivalence between importance and social desirability judgments could be questioned on the basis that the former refers to a personal evaluation whereas the latter to a social evaluation. Although theoretically distinct, these two levels are often highly correlated empirically. For example, [Le Barbanchon et al. \(2005\)](#) found very strong correlations between judgments of social desirability and likeability ($r = .96$).

standard and social desirability instructions obtained in Study 1 ($r_{\text{mean-between-participants}} = .50$; $r_{\text{mean-within-participants}} = .64$)⁷ confirmed that this instruction was a reasonable proxy for social desirability. Thus, for the sake of completeness and transparency, I labelled this instruction 'social desirability/standard'. For social utility, participants were asked to rate the worth each value has in the current contemporary society. Cambon (2026) showed that this instruction was highly correlated with several other measures of social utility. Secondly, as the results obtained for security values in Study 1 were very similar to those obtained for conformity values and in order to reduce respondents' burden, I decided to exclude this value from Study 2⁸. Finally, I used a more heterogeneous sample. As interest in different academic disciplines has been shown to predict the relative importance attached to values (Lindeman & Verkasalo, 2005), I used a sample that included students from the humanities, human sciences, business, engineering, mathematics and computer science, and biology. Since social utility is more related to shared representation (i.e., what is perceived as valuable in society) than social desirability, and judgments of social utility are generally less malleable than those of social desirability (Yzerbyt & Cambon, 2017), I expect social utility judgments to be more consensual and less dependent on academic discipline than judgments of social desirability/standard. More specifically, I expect that whatever their major, participants judged the social utility of personal values very similarly. In contrast, the social desirability attributed to personal values will vary from major to major. I did not have a specific hypothesis about the effect of majors. However, based on past literature, one might expect business, engineering, and mathematics and computer science majors to judge self-enhancement values as more desirable and self-transcendence values as less desirable than humanities and human sciences majors would (Arieli et al., 2020; Lindeman & Verkasalo, 2005).

7) The between-participants correlation is the average of the ten correlations (one for each value) between the standard and social desirability instructions across participants. The within-participants correlation is the mean of the 138 correlations (one for each participant) between the standard and social desirability instructions across the different values. Analyses examining the relationship between social desirability and standard instructions, which are presented in the exploratory analyses section of the supplementary material, demonstrate that responses to the social desirability instruction predict those to the standard instruction. These results are consistent with those of Dentale et al. (2018), as discussed in the introduction, and with research showing that judgments of importance and desirability load onto the same evaluative factor (Osgood et al., 1957).

8) This choice could raise concerns because values are part of a continuum and are generally examined as such. However, the purpose of the present investigation was not to study the structure of values, but rather how they are valued, with a strong focus on the difference between self-enhancement and self-transcendence values. In this context, removing the security value from the continuum was less problematic. Comparing the results of both studies showed that the relative ranking of values under each instruction changed little. This indicates that removing the security value was inconsequential.

Method

This study was pre-registered (see [Cambon, 2024b](#)) . I report all manipulations, measures and exclusions⁹.

Participants

To explore the effect of majors, I decided to reach at least 250 students from six departments. Using the Pangea Webapp to compute power analyses, this sample size offered 90% power to detect an effect size as low as $d = .20$ for the three-way interaction between majors, instructions and values. I finally stopped data collection upon reaching 1900 students during the Spring of 2024. A total of 19 participants were excluded either because they did not finish the study or they had no response variance. This yielded an effective $N = 1881$ ($M_{age} = 21.78$, $SD_{age} = 3.87$, 59% women; $N_{humanities} = 305$; $N_{math \& \text{ computer sciences}} = 286$; $N_{human \text{ sciences}} = 309$; $N_{engineering} = 298$; $N_{business} = 308$; $N_{biology} = 375$). Participants were from the same university as those of Study 1.

Procedure and Design

An internet link to the study was sent by e-mail to the students of the six majors asking them to participate to an on-line study presented as dealing with personal values. Participants received no compensation. After agreeing to participate, they rated the social desirability and the social utility of nine personal values. The instructions' presentation order was randomized, as was the presentation order of the personal values. After each instruction, participants completed a manipulation check. The study lasted about 10 minutes. They ended by answering demographic questions. The study used a 6 (type of major: humanities vs. human sciences vs. business vs. engineering vs. math & computer science vs. biology) X 2 (instruction: social desirability/standard vs. social utility) X 9 (personal values: power vs. achievement vs. hedonism vs. stimulation vs. self direction vs. universalism vs. benevolence vs. conformity vs. tradition) design, the first variable being between-participants, the others within-participants.

Material

Instructions — The nine values were presented as ideals, defined as “broad, desirable goals that can be used as life-guiding principles”. In the social desirability/standard instruction, participants were asked to rate “how important each ideal is to you”, whereas they were asked to rate “the value that each ideal has in the current contemporary society” in the social utility instruction.

9) As part of another project, participants were also asked to rate the social desirability and utility of various traits.

Personal Values — As in Study 1, the Short Schwartz Value Survey was used but I excluded the security item. The items were rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important for me/not at all valorized in the current contemporary society*) to 6 (*of absolute importance for me/absolutely valorized in the current contemporary society*).

Manipulation Check — In order to test whether participants understood the instructions, they were asked to specify what type of judgment they made on the same scale as in Study 1.

Results

In order to check the effectiveness of the manipulation, I first submitted participants' answers on the manipulation check question to a repeated measure ANOVA with the instruction as variable. The manipulation was effective, $F(1, 1880) = 24641.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .93$. Social desirability/standard instruction had a significantly lower mean ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .55$) than social utility instruction ($M = 4.44$, $SD = .58$).

Main Analyses

I only present the results on the nine personal values (analyses on the aggregation of these values into self-enhancement, openness-to-change, self-transcendence, and conservation, are presented in the supplementary materials, Table S3 and S4). I mean-centered participants' response to each item and conducted a 9 (personal values) X 2 (Instructions) X 6 (Type of Majors) ANOVA with the two first variables as within-participants, and the last as between participants. All effects were significant, however, for the sake of brevity, I will only present the values X instruction interaction, $F(8, 15000) = 1353.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .42$; and its modulation by the type of major, $F(40, 15000) = 18.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. Probing the two-way interaction showed that value priorities when assessed with a social desirability/standard focus differed significantly from value priorities when assessed with a social utility focus (see Table 2). In particular, while benevolence and universalism were rated as the two most socially desirable values, they were rated as the least socially useful. In contrast, power and, to a lesser extent achievement, were among the least desirable values, whereas they were the two most socially useful values. Values related to openness-to-change and conservation were globally perceived as mildly useful and desirable compared to self-enhancement and self-transcendence. In addition, evaluation of social utility and social desirability/standard differed for all personal values.

Table 2
Means (Standard Deviation) for Each Personal Value as a Function of Instructions

	AC	PO	ST	HE	SD	CO	TR	BE	UN
Social utility	1.35 g (1.04)	0.99 f (1.15)	0.97 f (.95)	0.39 d (1.02)	0.61 e (1.02)	-0.84 c (1.12)	-1.05 b (1.06)	-1.02 b (1.14)	-1.40 a (1.04)
Social desirability/standard	<i>0.22 e</i> (1.17)	<i>-1.38 a</i> (1.21)	<i>0.35 e</i> (1.11)	<i>0.06 d</i> (.99)	<i>0.44 f</i> (.91)	<i>-0.28 c</i> (1.19)	<i>-0.65 b</i> (1.20)	<i>0.62 g</i> (1.05)	<i>0.59 g</i> (1.06)

Note. For each row, means with different subscript are significantly different at $p < .01$ after applying Tukey corrections. For each column, means with different font (bold vs. italic) differ significantly at $p < .01$. AC = achievement, PO = power, ST = stimulation, HE = hedonism, SD = self-direction, CO = conformity, TR = tradition, BE = benevolence, UN = universalism.

To further probe the three-way interaction, I decomposed it by major. For each major, the two-way interaction between personal values and focus was significant with strong and comparable effect sizes (see Table 3). The results showed that while judgments of social utility were fairly consistent across majors, judgments of social desirability/standard were much more variable (see Figure 1). When it came to social utility judgment, achievement was always judged to be the most important value, power and stimulation were always judged to be second or third, self-direction was always judged to be the fourth, and hedonism the fifth, conformity the sixth or seventh, tradition and benevolence the sixth, seventh or eighth, and universalism was always judged to be the least socially useful value. Of the 135 possible comparisons between majors, only 9 reach significance (see Table 3). The consensus obtained for social utility judgments contrasted sharply with the heterogeneity of the social desirability/standard judgments. Indeed, not a single value was judged consensually by all majors. Of the 135 possible comparisons between majors, 64 were significant. Most of these differences were consistent with previous studies. Notably, humanities and human sciences majors found power values to be less desirable than business, engineering, and math and computer science majors did. Humanities and human sciences majors also judged benevolence and universalism as more desirable than other majors did. Contradicting past literature, humanities and human sciences majors did not judge achievement to be less desirable than other majors did. Surprisingly, they judged stimulation as more desirable and hedonism as less desirable than other majors. Finally, humanities and human sciences majors judged tradition and conservation values as less desirable than all other majors.

Table 3
Means (Standard Deviation) and Effect Size for the Interaction Between Personal Value and Instructions as a Function of Majors

	AC	PO	ST	HE	SD	CO	TR	BE	UN	Statistic
Humanities majors										
Social desirability/standard	0.18 ^{.12} (1.07)	-1.51 ^{.3} (1.34)	0.95 ^{.1} (1.18)	-0.38 ^{.2} (1.17)	0.32 ^{.12} (.97)	-0.67 ^{.2} (1.20)	-1.07 ^{.2} (1.19)	1.22 ^{.1} (.94)	0.96 ^{.1} (1.05)	$\eta_p^2 = .49$
Social utility	1.46 ^{.1} (1.02)	1.14 ^{.1} (1.12)	1.16 ^{.1} (.94)	0.34 ^{.12} (1.11)	0.78 ^{.1} (1.01)	-0.98 ^{.1} (1.16)	-1.39 ^{.1} (1.02)	-1.01 ^{.12} (.99)	-1.50 ^{.1} (1.06)	
Math and computer sciences majors										
Social desirability/standard	-0.04 ^{.2} (1.29)	-0.80 ^{.1} (1.14)	0.14 ^{.2} (.82)	0.18 ^{.1} (.91)	0.24 ^{.2} (.87)	-0.08 ^{.1} (1.06)	-0.35 ^{.1} (1.19)	0.10 ^{.3} (.88)	0.48 ^{.2} (.99)	$\eta_p^2 = .37$
Social utility	1.22 ^{.1} (1.05)	0.80 ^{.1} (1.18)	0.92 ^{.1} (.97)	0.56 ^{.1} (.94)	0.59 ^{.1} (1.05)	-0.74 ^{.1} (.93)	-0.72 ^{.1} (1.17)	-1.25 ^{.1} (1.11)	-1.38 ^{.1} (.96)	
Human sciences majors										
Social desirability/standard	0.24 ^{.12} (1.26)	-1.75 ^{.3} (.93)	0.96 ^{.1} (.91)	-0.02 ^{.1} (.92)	0.35 ^{.2} (.98)	-0.69 ^{.2} (1.22)	-1.12 ^{.2} (1.04)	0.96 ^{.1} (.99)	1.07 ^{.1} (.94)	$\eta_p^2 = .51$
Social utility	1.40 ^{.1} (.99)	1.16 ^{.1} (1.12)	0.92 ^{.1} (1.01)	0.54 ^{.1} (1.10)	0.55 ^{.1} (.97)	-0.78 ^{.1} (1.07)	-1.03 ^{.12} (1.04)	-1.24 ^{.1} (1.13)	-1.54 ^{.1} (1.02)	
Engineering majors										
Social desirability/standard	0.28 ^{.12} (1.18)	-1.37 ^{.23} (1.26)	0.28 ^{.2} (.97)	0.09 ^{.1} (1.01)	0.53 ^{.12} (.93)	-0.23 ^{.1} (1.23)	-0.43 ^{.1} (1.20)	0.45 ^{.2} (1.04)	0.38 ^{.2} (1.04)	$\eta_p^2 = .36$
Social utility	1.23 ^{.1} (1.14)	0.98 ^{.1} (1.12)	0.96 ^{.1} (.96)	0.32 ^{.12} (1.00)	0.60 ^{.1} (.99)	-0.96 ^{.1} (1.06)	-1.09 ^{.12} (1.27)	-0.75 ^{.2} (.94)	-1.28 ^{.1} (1.19)	
Business majors										
Social desirability/standard	0.15 ^{.12} (1.13)	-1.19 ^{.2} (1.17)	-0.39 ^{.3} (1.05)	0.26 ^{.1} (.91)	0.61 ^{.1} (.77)	0.14 ^{.1} (1.17)	-0.35 ^{.1} (1.16)	0.49 ^{.2} (1.05)	0.26 ^{.2} (1.01)	$\eta_p^2 = .42$

	AC	PO	ST	HE	SD	CO	TR	BE	UN	Statistic
Social utility	1.28 ¹ (.99)	1.02 ¹ (1.07)	0.97 ¹ (.99)	0.42 ¹² (.95)	0.52 ¹ (1.02)	-0.76 ¹ (.11)	-1.11 ¹² (1.01)	-1.01 ¹² (1.10)	-1.34 ¹ (1.09)	
Biology majors										
Social desirability/standard	0.44¹ (1.06)	-1.57 ³ (1.17)	0.17² (1.04)	0.23¹ (.91)	0.55¹ (.84)	-0.16 ¹ (1.05)	-0.57 ¹ (1.18)	0.48² (1.02)	0.40² (1.03)	$\eta_p^2 = .40$
Social utility	1.46 ¹ (1.00)	0.86 ¹ (1.22)	0.91 ¹ (.86)	0.20 ² (.95)	0.61 ¹ (1.05)	-0.85 ¹ (1.16)	-0.95 ²³ (1.08)	-0.90 ¹² (1.14)	-1.34 ¹ (1.04)	

Note. For each row, means with different subscripts differ significantly from each other at $p < .01$. Significant comparison between majors for a given instruction within a given value (e.g., Social desirability of achievement) are indicated by different superscripts, with $p < .01$. Significant comparisons between instruction for a given major (e.g., biology) are indicated by different fonts (bold vs italic), with $p < .01$. All tests apply Tukey correction. Statistic corresponds to the effect size of the two-way interaction for each major. AC = achievement, PO = power, ST = stimulation, HE = hedonism, SD = self-direction, CO = conformity, TR = tradition, BE = benevolence, UN = universalism.

Figure 1

Radar Chart of the Mean Judgments of Majors for Personal Values Under a Social Utility and Social Desirability/Standard Focus



Note. Concentric circles represent mean judgment going from negative (center) to positive (borders). AC = achievement, PO = power, ST = stimulation, HE = hedonism, SD = self-direction, CO = conformity, TR = tradition, BE = benevolence, UN = universalism. Hum = Humanities, Hu.Sc = Human sciences, Math = Mathematics and computer science, Eng = Engineering, Bus = Business, Bio = Biology.

To obtain another estimation of consensus, I computed the intraclass correlation coefficient and its 95% confidence intervals based on a mean-rating ($k = 6$), consistency, 2-way random-effects model for social desirability/standard and for social utility judgments. The majors were treated as the “raters” and their mean scores for each value were considered the subjects, resulting in a table of 6 columns and 9 rows. Both ICC were high due to the small number of subjects, however, the ICC for social desirability judgment was lower, $ICC = .95$, $[.88; .98]$, $F(8, 40) = 21.1$, $p < .001$, than the ICC for social utility judgment, $ICC = .997$, $[.991; .999]$, $F(8, 40) = 294.01$, $p < .001$. As the two confidence intervals do not overlap, it can be concluded that social utility judgments were significantly more consensual than judgments of social desirability/standard (Ramasundarahettige et al., 2009).

Discussion

Although Study 2 used a different, more direct method, the results replicated those of Study 1: the most socially desirable values were self-transcendence and the least desirable were self-enhancement, with openness-to-change and conservation in between. In stark contrast, the value priorities that emerged from a focus on social utility were exactly the opposite. Another aim of this study was to demonstrate that social utility judgments were more consensual than social desirability/standard judgments by using different majors. Consistent with this hypothesis, social utility judgments varied less from major to major and were more consensual than social desirability/standard judgments. As for social desirability/standard judgments, and consistent with past literature,

humanities and human sciences majors found self-transcendence values to be more desirable than other majors did. They also judged power values as less desirable than business, engineering, and math and computer science majors did. However, their judgment of achievement did not differ from that of other majors, contradicting past research.

General Discussion

Research on the importance of personal values revealed an apparent inconsistency between studies indicating that self-transcendence values were the most endorsed and those suggesting that self-enhancement values were prioritized in capitalist economies. The aim of the present studies was to demonstrate how people's evaluative focus when judging personal values can help explain this discrepancy. Globally, the results showed that, as expected, when people's focus was on social desirability they prioritized self-transcendence values and rejected self-enhancement values, whereas the opposite occurred when the focus was on social utility, with openness-to-change and conservation values in the middle. To my knowledge, this is the first time that such a hiatus is shown in the literature on personal values.

To increase the external validity of our test, Study 2 used a more direct and ecological method than Study 1. Despite this difference, the results of both studies were quite similar. In addition, I used a population that was quite diverse in its interests and goals. Some participants were in fields known to favor more humanistic and egalitarian values (humanities and human sciences majors), while others were in fields known to promote more materialistic values (engineering, mathematics, biology) and even competitive ones (business). Irrespective of their field of study, participants judged the social utility of values in the same way, with a high degree of consensus. In contrast, judgments of social desirability were moderated by students' affiliations: students in more materialistic and competitive fields found power values less undesirable than students in more humanistic fields, while the latter found self-transcendence values much more desirable than the former. This finding is consistent with a number of studies showing that individuals and groups who work in, or have interests and goals related to, market-oriented organizations or fields (i.e., people working in for-profit organizations, students in business) place more importance on self-enhancement values than individuals or groups working in, or having interests in, social-oriented organizations or fields (i.e., people working in non-profit organizations, students in psychology) whereas the latter endorse self-transcendence values to a higher extent (Arieli et al., 2020).

Finally, it should be noted that the greater social utility attributed to self-enhancement values over self-transcendence ones is not an isolated finding. In fact, they replicate results obtained using implicit measures of values. For example, Van Berkel et al. (2015) showed that participants asked to respond quickly by giving their first, gut-level, answer, a procedure known to produce judgments similar to other indirect measures such as the

IAT (Gawronski & Hahn, 2018), judged power and achievement values more positively than benevolence and universalism. Dentale et al. (2018, Study 1) found similar results using two IATs, one contrasting achievement to benevolence and the other contrasting power to universalism. The similarity between the judgments obtained under a social utility focus and indirect measures is concerning and requires a more systematic investigation. However, it is important to note that this similarity is already compatible with an interpretation of indirect measures as a way to capture the most salient features in the environment (Payne et al., 2017). According to this interpretation, indirect tools do not measure people's preference for, or endorsement of, a value, but rather its importance and salience in the environment. One can easily imagine that what makes a value salient and important is its social utility. It should come as no surprise that the explicit judgment of the social utility of values produced the same result as the indirect measure.

One lingering question when it comes to personal values is their relationship to behavior (Roccas & Sagiv, 2017). Given that the present work shows that people can simultaneously hold two contrasting value prioritizations in mind, a legitimate question is which hierarchy is more predictive of behavior. From the parallel sketches in the previous paragraph between indirect measures of values and judgments of their social utility, it can be inferred that social utility judgments will be more predictive of a behavior than social desirability ones. Indeed, in Van Berkel et al. (2015, Study 6) as in Dentale et al. (2018, Study 2), the indirect measure of values was a better predictor of behavior than the direct measure (a measure of the importance of values). The better predictive validity of judgments of social utility obviously requires more formal testing. But if confirmed, it would help to integrate contrasting findings in the literature and notably the hiatus between a general self-reported preference for self-transcendence values and the parallel constant growth in indicators of materialistic, competitive behavior measured in most capitalist societies (Twenge & Kasser, 2013). Given this gap between the values people consider desirable and their behavior, it is reasonable to ask whether the social desirability of self-transcendence serves a palliative function. Indeed, valuing humanistic and egalitarian values in a world of competition and inequality can be seen as a way of distorting one's understanding of one's lived realities and of obscuring and reproducing the harsh nature of the social functioning (Bettache, 2024).

Our empirical efforts do have limitations. One limitation is that the data were collected only in the French context. However, given the cross-cultural consensus on the prioritization of values (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022), there is no theoretical reason to expect different results regarding the social desirability of personal values. With regard to perceptions of social utility, it should be noted that France is probably one of the Western societies where opposition to liberalism is the strongest (Girerd et al., 2021), and thus where the valorization of self-enhancement should be highly disputed. Consequently, the finding that even French participants recognize the social utility of values that they would otherwise consider socially undesirable is reassuring as to the validity of

the results obtained. A promising cross-cultural investigation would be to examine the relationship that exists between judgments of the social desirability and social utility of personal values, whether the correlation between the two judgments is negative, zero, or positive. Indeed, a possible hypothesis would be that the relationship between the two dimensions is all the more positive that people have internalized the social utility of values. From this perspective, one should expect a positive correlation in countries where the principles of a competitive economy are culturally accepted (such as the United States, see [Schwartz, 2007](#)) and a negative correlation in countries where these principles are much more disputed (such as France). The current results only partially support this interpretation, since in our sample, although negative, the correlations were weak and not significant ($r_{\text{mean-Study 1}}(138) = -.18$; $r_{\text{mean-Study 2}}(1881) = -.04$).

In the same vein, another limitation was that participants were only students. Research suggests that this type of sample is not fully representative of the general population ([Henrich et al., 2010](#)). However, one reassuring fact about the representativeness of the present results is that they are consistent with data obtained from more representative population. As discussed above, the results obtained from business versus humanities and social sciences majors mirrored those from studies involving individuals and groups working in market-versus social-oriented organizations ([Arieli et al., 2020](#)).

Finally, the heterogeneity of the operationalizations of social desirability and social utility could be considered a limitation. Study 1 employed a self-presentation paradigm whereas Study 2 used more traditional self-report instructions. Additionally, despite the efforts made to standardize the social utility instructions using similar terms (i.e., “value in today’s (contemporary) society”), the social desirability instructions varied considerably more. Indeed, the social desirability instruction in Study 2 was equivalent to the standard instruction in Study 1. While the differences in operationalization were justified by the high correlations between the standard and social desirability instructions, it should be recognized that correlation does not imply equivalence in capturing the same concept. Nevertheless, the fact that the results of both studies were quite similar send a reassuring message as to the equivalence of these instructions.

To conclude, the finding that people consider self-transcendence values to be the most important is reassuring for our vision of humanity. It has fueled theoretical work suggesting the advent of a post-materialist society ([Inglehart, 1977](#)). However, the present work suggests that the whole story may not be so rosy, and that this preference only stands under the specific focus of social desirability. However, when asked to consider personal value priority from a social utility point of view, people consider self-enhancement to be the most important values. The specific focus adopted when judging personal values is thus crucial to understand people’s priorities.

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Data Availability: All data and analysis code are available on this study's OSF page (see [Cambon, 2025](#)).

Supplementary Materials

For this article, the following Supplementary Materials are available:

- Preregistration Study 1 (see [Cambon, 2024a](#))
- Preregistration Study 2 (see [Cambon, 2024b](#))
- Data (see [Cambon, 2025](#))

Index of Supplementary Materials

Cambon, L. (2024a). *The societal value and the likeability of Schwartz's values 1* [Preregistration Study 1]. OSF. <https://osf.io/2egsp>

Cambon, L. (2024b). *The societal value and the likeability of Schwartz's values 2* [Preregistration Study 2]. OSF. <https://osf.io/urekw>

Cambon, L. (2026). *Evaluative focus and personal values* [Data]. OSF. <https://osf.io/cx8wb>

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